

Written evidence submitted by The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) (VSH0001)

Introduction

1. The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) is the regulatory body for veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses in the UK. We aim to enhance society through improved animal health and welfare. We do this by setting, upholding and advancing the educational, ethical and clinical standards of the veterinary professions. This includes ensuring that overseas-qualified veterinary graduates who wish to join the UK Register are appropriately qualified.
2. This briefing note summarises the RCVS's understanding of the current veterinary workforce shortage, including its origins, measures taken to address the issue, and potential future solutions.

Overview of the veterinary workforce

3. There are 30,272 veterinary surgeons on the UK-Practising Register, and 23,450 veterinary nurses¹. These numbers have been growing for many years, and are anticipated to continue to grow. However, this growth has not met demand. In 2018 data from the veterinary Major Employers Group suggested that there was an 11.5% shortage of veterinary surgeons, a shortage which is believed to have grown subsequently. The shortage is understood to be particularly acute in certain sectors, particularly veterinary public health.
4. The RCVS is currently working with the Institute of Employment Studies to develop a workforce model, which will give us a better understanding of the shortage, including predicting how it is likely to change over the next ten years.
5. There are a number of routes to become a veterinary surgeon:
 - a. Graduation from a UK veterinary school with an RCVS-recognised degree.
 - b. Graduation from an overseas school whose qualification is recognised by the RCVS
 - c. Successful completion of the RCVS Statutory Membership Exam, for overseas veterinary surgeons whose qualification is not recognised by the RCVS.

The role of veterinarians in public health

6. Veterinary surgeons play a crucial role in protecting public health. The two main ways in which they do this are 1) protecting the public from zoonotic disease and, 2) ensuring the safety of animal products entering the food chain, from farm to fork. Veterinary certification is essential in meeting the international trade requirements for the export of products of animal origin, and there

¹ As of 27/02/2024

has been a significant increase in demand for this work since Britain's withdrawal from the European Union.

The veterinary workforce shortage

7. During the UK's membership of the European Union (EU) the RCVS was bound by the Mutual Recognition of Professional Qualifications Directive (MRPQ). This meant that the RCVS automatically recognised the veterinary degrees of graduates from EU veterinary schools. During the period that the MRPQ was in effect, the UK became heavily reliant on EU-qualified veterinary surgeons. By the time of the Brexit referendum in 2016, over 50% of annual registrations came from the EU, with less than 50% coming from UK veterinary schools. Registrations from non-EU countries were and remain low as a percentage of the total, though they have begun to rise significantly in recent years.
8. Following the referendum result EU registrations went into a sharp decline (following a brief uptick as applicants sought to register before the end of the MRPQ) dropping from 1195 registrants in 2018 to 365 in 2021. This happened despite the RCVS continued to recognise degrees from the majority of EU veterinary schools (on the basis that they were accredited by the European Association of Establishments for Veterinary Education (EAEVE), a pan-European voluntary accreditation body). While there has subsequently been a partial recovery in numbers, reaching 536 in 2023, they remain less than 50% of their height.
9. The decline in numbers is likely due to a number of factors, including an increase in the number of jobs requiring veterinary certification within the EU, a sense that the UK is now less welcoming to migrants, and a minority of EU veterinary degrees no longer being recognised. Further, there is no longer a legal basis for discriminating between EU and non-EU overseas graduates, and so all overseas registrants now have to demonstrate their English language ability at IELTS Level 7, which is the professional standard used by the majority of UK regulators.
10. The veterinary shortage has led to the RCVS agreeing a 'temporary registration of Novice Official Veterinarians' (TRNOVs) scheme whereby suitably-qualified EU veterinary surgeons with IELTS Level 6 English may temporarily register with the RCVS and work under suitable levels of supervision. TRNOVs work in abattoirs in England and Wales, protecting food safety and animal health and welfare, whilst further developing their English language skills.

Current measures to increase recruitment, retention, and return

11. The RCVS has a number of initiatives as part of its Workforce Action Plan to help to promote recruitment, retention and return to the veterinary profession, including:
 - a. The RCVS Academy, a digital learning platform for veterinary professionals. The Academy aims to support vets and vet nurses to meet professional standards by providing relevant, up-to-date knowledge, and includes courses aimed at improving rates of retention and return to the profession.
 - b. A Diversity & Inclusion Group to try to attract a wider pool of applicants to join the veterinary profession.

- c. A Veterinary Graduate Development Programme (VetGDP) to support new graduates as they make that first difficult step into the workplace, and to provide a sound footing for their future working lives.
- d. A 'Mind Matters Initiative' which aims to improve the mental health and wellbeing of those in the veterinary team. The RCVS funds and encourages veterinary mental health research, with a view to helping to develop interventions and long-term solutions to some of the common issues such research identifies.
- e. A project with the Institute of Employment Studies which seeks to model the veterinary workforce and better understand the shortage in the profession, with predictions of how that is likely to change over a ten-year period. It is hoped that this model will also help to measure the impact of initiatives designed to improve recruitment, retention, and return.

How can government help to address the workforce shortage?

12. While the measures taken above are designed to increase the rate of recruitment, retention, and return, there are limits to what can be achieved without government intervention. The RCVS recommends that government policy includes the following:

A new Veterinary Surgeons Act

13. The Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 underpins the role and powers of the RCVS. This legislation is very out of date, preventing the RCVS from being a best-practice regulator in some respects. The RCVS agreed a package of recommendations for legislative reform in 2021. These recommendations include empowering the RCVS to become the regulator of the wider vet-led team, such as veterinary technicians and musculoskeletal therapists, and allowing greater delegation from veterinary surgeons to paraprofessionals. This would free up veterinary surgeons to focus on the work that only they can do, potentially alleviating the workforce shortage.

The need for increased funding for UK veterinary schools

14. The veterinary medicine degree is the most expensive degree to deliver. The overall pool of government funding for veterinary degrees in England & Wales is capped, meaning that as the number of veterinary students grows the subsidy per student is reduced. Veterinary schools do not receive a subsidy in the way that medical schools do from the NHS. Increases in home student numbers have therefore been achieved in part by subsidising their degrees from the fees of overseas students. An increase in government funding for veterinary degrees would allow a greater proportion of veterinary student places to be given to home students, who are more likely to join the UK Register and to remain in the UK long-term.

Increasing the capacity of the RCVS Statutory Membership Examination

15. The RCVS Statutory Membership Examination must be passed for overseas veterinary surgeons whose qualification is not recognised by the RCVS, before their name can be entered on the Register of UK veterinary surgeons. The format of the Examination is currently set out in the Veterinary Surgeons Act, and requires a Statutory Instrument to amend it. Modernisation of the format and delivery of the Examination are needed to allow it to be scaled up to allow for a growing number of applicants. The RCVS has therefore asked Defra for such a Statutory

Instrument, but also recommends that any replacement for the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 empowers the RCVS to make such changes in future without the requirement for legislation.

Debt relief for graduates working in areas of shortage

16. The RCVS has examined schemes in the United States and New Zealand in which student debt is forgiven in exchange for veterinary graduates working in areas of shortage, whether geographic or sectoral. In the United Kingdom a bursary scheme already exists to forgive student debt for veterinary graduates who join the Royal Army Veterinary Corps for at least four years. The RCVS recommends that these models are used to explore the implementation of similar schemes for veterinary public health and areas of particular veterinary shortage such as the Highlands and Islands.

Funding for the direct accreditation of overseas veterinary schools

17. Certain overseas - and especially European – veterinary schools account for a significant proportion of overseas-qualified registrants in the UK. The RCVS would like to target these schools for direct accreditation, in the same way that it does for UK veterinary schools, thereby guaranteeing standards while streamlining the process for registration of those graduates in the UK. However, this would be a considerable cost burden on the RCVS, and it is difficult to justify substantial use of RCVS Members' fees for this purpose. Government support in the form of funding for overseas accreditation visits would address this problem.

Ensuring that appropriately-qualified overseas veterinary surgeons can gain a working visa

18. Overseas-qualified veterinary surgeons may be able to register in the UK, but that does not guarantee them access to a Skilled Worker Visa. Veterinary Surgeons are currently on the Shortage Occupation List, but government policy changes are expected to see that end in April 2024, as well as raising the wage threshold above the level at which many overseas-qualified veterinary surgeons are initially employed in the UK. This risks exacerbating the workforce shortage.

March 2024